

Ziploc and Velcro

The playground was a scary place on the first day of school. I knew some of the faces around me, but not enough to make me feel comfortable in this strange world I was entering. A dog barked from down the street. A girl standing near me kept smacking her doll against the brick wall. The other kids looked either restless, frightened, or both. I wanted to go back to kindergarten, where I knew all the letter people and the scissors weren't sharp enough to draw blood.

I was little for my age. I'd known how to read since before kindergarten, but I still didn't know how to tie my shoes. Rhiannon taught me how to read; Meredith kept saying she'd teach me how to tie my shoes but never got around to it so she bought Velcro-strapped shoes. Velcro fit together.

I thought about the letter people and how they fit together to form words. Matt Schultz and I used to carry the letter people around the kindergarten room, stomping our feet like soldiers in one of Bill's war movies. I carried Mr. D because that was the first letter in my name. Matt carried Miss A because he didn't like Mr. M. It was around that time that I first made up the world of the robots and started telling Matt stories about it. He liked my stories.

I didn't see him anywhere. I hoped he'd be in my class again.

Darrell Boatman sat at the desk in front of me. In my head I called him Blubber Butt because he wore pants that were too loose and his butt crack had a tendency to

show. Blubber Butt smelled like rotten apples. Something always seemed to be moving in his greasy hair.

The teacher was a heavysset, wrinkly lady named Mrs. Bradley. She didn't stand up when she taught but her eyebrows moved up and down a lot. I could hear birds chirping from outside but they were hard to hear because her voice was so loud. I liked it better when Rhiannon taught me; she had a softer, prettier voice. Rhiannon was in the same school building as me, but she was in one of the fifth-grade classrooms, on the second floor.

Behind me sat Doug Fry, a redheaded pudgy kid who breathed almost as loud as Mrs. Bradley spoke. Doug seemed to be perpetually gasping for air. That first day alone he fell asleep three or four times during class. Each time Mrs. Bradley woke him up he'd say something like, "I go see my Gramps and he watches Johnny Carson and laughs and I can't sleep then." His face turned red every time.

The lunchroom was like a maze of big kids endlessly throwing mashed potatoes at each other. The only person I saw that I knew was Blubber Butt, and I refused to sit down next to him because he smelled. I opened my Star Wars lunchbox. Meredith had packed a bologna sandwich with cheese and mustard. There was also a small box of raisins, a Thermos of milk, and a Ziploc bag of plain potato chips. Ziploc fit together. The bread from the sandwich was squishy between my tongue and the roof of my mouth. I turned eating into a game. If I could eat my sandwich in fifteen bites or less, I'd win. If not, I'd lose. Bite by bite. I finished in thirteen bites, but that was an unlucky number so I knocked once on the table to make up for it because that was in the rules of the game.

I loved playing games.

At recess I played by myself. The other kids ran, jumped, slid, threw a big red rubber ball back and forth. The girls played house and the boys pretended to wrestle. I

sat on the ground next to the monkey bars, watching. I tried to think of something fun to do.

Matt Schultz was walking past the teeter-totters. He was taller than me, and he didn't so much walk as stroll, even almost glide, as if he was in complete control of his surroundings and was unashamed of anything. I waved at him; he waved back, but I didn't go over there. He was talking to a girl with shoulder-length blond hair who giggled at everything he said. I took a few steps and stopped next to the slide.

I could make something up. I was good at that.

The area underneath the slide could be a large doorway to the world of the robots. The robots needed my help. One of them had gone berserk and was beating the others up. I was the only one who knew, the only one who could remove the berserk robot's batteries and save the robot population. I'd be a hero.

All around me, kids ran back and forth, hollering and laughing, but I paid no attention to them. They climbed up and slid down, climbed up and slid down, but none of them ran through the doorway to the robot world. It was a good thing because nobody knew as much about that secret world as I did. After all, the creator of a world has to know a little something about his creations. I knew that the berserk robot (who would have a name like AR-13175) was setting fires, trying to damage the city I'd envisioned. I couldn't let him.

Something smelled like rotten apples.

Then I was on the pavement, wriggling, struggling to get back on my feet. Someone held me down, but I couldn't see who it was because there was an armpit in my face. The armpit's owner laughed, proud of himself for knocking me down. I pushed his arm out of the way; it was Blubber Butt.

My knee hurt. My elbow had a big red bump on it. My hands were skinned up from the pavement. I pushed Blubber Butt off me (sort of; he outweighed me by a good forty pounds) and tried to stand.

"Hey, kid, you ain't gettin away from me!" Blubber Butt swung his fist, hit me medium-hard in the chest. "I just knocked you down! When I knock you down you stay there, butt-plug! Hey Jimmy, come here!"

His friend ran over from the swings; Jimmy was taller than Blubber Butt, and a lot skinnier. Both of them started kicking me and shoving me down again. Mrs. Bradley, the teacher on recess duty, glanced over from her standing position by the doors to the school. She turned away to watch a group of girls playing with their dolls.

"This kid's too weak to be here," said Jimmy. "My Dad says you gotta be a man. This kid's a weak little boy."

"He sits behind me and taps on his desk a lot. Jimmy, this is Wuss. Wuss, Jimmy. I'm gonna bop 'im on the head, Jimmy."

"Cool!" Jimmy said, belting me in the stomach. *If I puke up my bologna sandwich, I thought, it's going all over these kids.*

Blubber Butt and Jimmy laughed as they twisted my body into new and unique shapes. They stopped when Matt Schultz ran over from the slide and screamed in Blubber Butt's face. I couldn't tell what he said because the words were too fast, but I knew he was sticking up for me.

"Schultz, I'll kick you in the willy-worm!" Jimmy said, grabbing Matt's shirt. They started fighting. I tried to get loose so I could help Matt, but Blubber Butt kept picking me up and dropping me. It hurt. It was a game to Blubber Butt. Evidently it was a game to Mrs. Bradley as well, because she didn't do anything about it. A bunch of kids were watching; Doug Fry yelled, "Leave Duncan alone!"

Then Rhiannon was there, pulling Blubber Butt off me, calling him names I'd have been spanked for saying. And at that point Mrs. Bradley finally decided to enter the proceedings, hands on hips as she walked toward us.

"Don't worry about us, Mrs. Batshit, you just stand there," Rhiannon said in a calm, but far from soothing, voice.

"Young woman, excuse you please!" Mrs. Bradley snapped. I wondered, briefly, how long it would take to count all the wrinkles in her face. You'd probably have had to be a robot to count that high. "Perhaps you'd like to go to Mr. Whitman's office and get some Dial to wash your mouth out with. He keeps it in his desk for ugly-mouthed children like you."

"You can't talk to me that way," Rhiannon said. "You're the first-grade teacher. I'm in fifth. So do your job."

"This *is* my job. You're disrupting my recess."

Rhiannon's eyes narrowed; her head tilted. "Hmm, disrupting. Let's see. I look out the window during science to see if I can see my brother. I see these little bastards throwing him all over the playground. I run down to stop it. Yeah, sorry to disrupt."

"Um, I wasn't doing it," Matt said. "I was helping Duncan."

Rhiannon grinned at him, just slightly.

Mrs. Bradley blinked several times. "Matthew--"

"Call me Schultz," he said. "It ain't cool what they were doing--"

"Matthew! Be quiet! Rhiannon, I will not put up with you or your foul street-gutter language," she said. "If I wanted to sit and listen to uneducated hoodlum speech like that, I'd find a men's locker room after a basketball game."

Blubber Butt and Jimmy scowled at Rhiannon. Matt Schultz watched every move she made.

I stared at the slide, searching for the doorway leading to the world I'd created. I couldn't see it.

"We'll get your mother here in just a few minutes. *Both* of your parents will be here if Mr. Whitman can get in touch with your father at work--"

My invisible, secret world. If I could get there, nobody would throw me on the ground.

"Mr. Whitman can kiss my butt. He made me write a hundred sentences just because I ran in the hallway last year--"

In my world everybody would be rich and they'd all go around eating jelly beans all day--

--you insolent, good-for-nothing little--"

The robots needed their creator.

"Fine, let's go. Come on, Duncan. Duncan, what are you looking at? Look at me." She gently moved my chin until I was looking in her direction. "We have to go in and talk to the principal now."

"But I'm trying to see the--"

She put a hand against my back and guided me toward the doors of the red-brick school building. Mrs. Bradley knocked on a classroom window and beckoned a young male teacher outside to watch the other kids while we all went inside. Nobody looked happy. I looked at the slide once more before we went in, and there, *there it was*, the doorway leading to the world of the robots, yeah, I saw it, it was all mine, they couldn't take it away, nobody could, not Blubber Butt or Jimmy or Mrs. Bradley, it was my very own invisible world, it was *Duncanworld*--

"Stop tripping on your feet, you dumb dick," Blubber Butt muttered.

I bent over and fastened the Velcro on my left shoe. It fit just like the doorway under the slide. All mine. It was Duncanworld. It was a part of me.